A NARRATIVE

OF

DANGERS OF THE SEA.

To

WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF

H. F. COOMBS,

ST. JOHN, New Brunswick,

CANADA.

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To the Humane.

The object of this publication is to direct the attention of the public, and particularly of legislators, to the pressing need for a stringent law and regulations under which unseaworthy, rotten vessels can be detained, and the owners of seaworthy ships be compelled to provide their vessels with a sufficient number of good, strong, sound boats, always ready provisioned and fitted up with life-saving appliances so as to afford the largest possible safety. That such legislation is necessary can be abundantly proved by the records of sufferings copied from the newspapers of Canada.

The writer's attention was first directed to this subject through reading of the wreck of the steamship *Warmouth*, lost on the Magdalen Islands late in the fall of 1882. After the ship struck the crew took to the boat, which capsized in the breakers. The survivor relates how the perishing boat's crew strove in vain to climb on the bottom of their upturned boat, only to fall back and perish in the seething waters. The boat, bottom up, was thrown on the shore a few minutes later, but the crew, save one, had all found a watery grave. The sole survivor floated to the shore on a plank.

Of the crew and passengers of the steamer *Vernon*, lost on lake Michigan, only one of fifty souls was saved. He says he was awakened about the middle of the night, by the cry, "the ship is sinking." He sprang out of the cabin window and

found himself on a life-raft with six others. It seemed but a moment till the vessel sank; all but a few went down with her. An awful night was passed, and one after another of his companions were washed off the raft—perished from cold and hunger. when abandoned the raft was only 8 miles from Shoboygan. Stone, the only survivor, was near dead from cold and hunger, having been sixty hours on the raft without food.

The following letters speak for themselves:

North Sydney, May 27.—The barque Kate McGuire, Capt. Temple, arrived here this evening from Buenos Ayres, having on board two American fisherman, who were picked up in a dory off Canso. The men were in a terribly exhausted condition having been six days without food or water. Their names are Edward Hogan and John Brown, of the American fishing schooner *Richard Lester*, Capt. John E. Vibert, and were fishing on the Banquero banks. They belong to Quebec and Boston respectively. They left their vessel, the *Richard Lester*, of Gloucester, Mass., at 4 o'clock on the morning of Thursday the 19th inst., for the purpose of visiting their trawls, a dense fog prevailing at the time. After rowing about for some time and being unable to find their trawls, they discovered that their compass was out of order. They immediately pulled in the direction of their vessel, but were unable to find her. The next day was also passed in fruitless search for their schooner. They then gave up all idea of finding her and relied on the hope of being picked up by some passing vessel. They saw several vessels pass, but could never get within hailing distance. Their sufferings during this time were fearful. They had not a drop of water. On May 24th they had given up all hopes of being saved, and one of them requested the other to cut off his arm and alleviate their thirst by drinking the blood. This offer was not accepted, and next morning about 8 a. m., they sighted a large barque and feebly rowed towards her. Fortunately, Captain Temple of the barque, noticed them and bore down upon them. They were soon alongside and were lifted on board, being in a most helpless condition. The men say that had they not succeeded in attracting the attention of the barque they had fully intended to have given up and laid themselves down to die. They were carefully attended to on board the barque and will be taken in charge by the American consul. They were 44 miles from

Canso when picked up but thought they were only about six, their compass being altogether useless. Their hands and limbs being very much swollen from the effect of their exposure and hardships. —*Halifax Herald.*

Detroit, Oct. 7th, 1887.—The Tug *Orient*, with all hands went down near Point Pelee, Tuesday afternoon. Shortly before the *Orient* went down her crew where seen bailing with pails, but their efforts were unavailing. Her fires were put out, and she went down head first carrying every living soul,6 in all, with her, As this vessel sank only a short distance from the shore, it is only fair to assume, that had she been provided with a good boat the crew could have saved themselves.—*The World of Toronto.*

Drifting about in an open boat without food or water, for ten days, with never a sail in sight, and three of their number dead, and the survivors slowly dying of cold and hunger, and too weak to answer the rescuers' welcome hail. Such was the story told by the seven survivors of the American barque "D. Chapin," which foundered in the Atlantic, Jan. 24th, 1888. The old story; a staunch ship, no thought of danger. A storm, the ship founders and the crew adrift in an open boat on the wild Atlantic. All night the wind howling a funeral dirge, and the seas breaking over them constantly drenched to the skin, not a particle of food nor a drop of water, their misery can be better imagined than described. On the morning of the 29th, Capt. Hall was delirious and dying, he thrust out his parched tongue and cried for water, he raved of home, his wife, and his lost vessel. In a rational interval he slipped a gold ring from his finger and handed it with a small chain to his chief officer, and bade him in a whisper to "send these to his wife in Boston," and then added "I am going to pray." His last words were, "I would give all I possess for a pitcher of water." A day later the steward died, and the next day a sailor died piteously begging for water. On Feb. 2nd, the seven survivors were suffering from cramps in the stomach, and salt water boils covered them from head to foot. A breeze sprang up on Feb. 3rd, and tying a coat to an oar for a signal, they looked in vain all day for a welcome sail. A passing vessel at last seen this signal of distress, and rescued them, but they were so weak as to have to be hoisted on board the schooner *Louis G. Rabel* where they were kindly treated. And all this misery and death might have been prevented, if this ship had been provided with boats furnished with life saving appliances, and stores of food and water. —*From the St. John Sun, Feb. 28, 1888.*

Just think of it! One hundred and twenty-seven fishermen drowned last season in vessels belonging to Gloucester, Mass. A

large number of these men belonged to the Maritime Provinces, some of them to this Island. Every year we hear the same old story. Vessels are built and sent to sea regardless of danger ahead. Many of these vessels look well enough, and their sailing qualities are all right in moderate weather, but they wretchedly fail when forced to face the storms that so often overtake them on Georges Banks. Trusting to them, many a poor fellow has met a watery grave. There are some parts of this Island, such as eastern King's County, where there is scarcely a family in the neighborhood but has lost a son or brother in these treacherous Gloucester crafts. It is time that our young men abandoned them and their Bank fishing altogether.—*Daily Examiner, Dec. 17, 1887.*

Mr. Henry F. Coombs, who is just now visiting Charlottetown, has left at the *Examiner* office the model of a boat fitted with a view to the saving of life in case of shipwreck. It is claimed that boats can be made comparatively safe by the use of the appliances, which consist of longtitudinal strips of iron at the sides to which persons who unfortunately suffer an upset may cling, or by means of which they may climb up to the keel, or under favorable circumstances right a capsized boat; of air chambers at the stem and stern; and of air and water-tight lockers under the thwarts in which provisions may be stored and kept undamaged. These are certainly great improvements on the ordinary ship's boats, and Mr. Coombs' proposal that an order should be issued for their adoption by the owners of all Canadian vessels, seems to be a good one, if the saving of life at sea is to be considered. Mr. Coombs is ready to yield up his patent right to the improvements without any recompence, if only the government will accept his proposal. Concerning the improvements, Mr. A. M. Smith, president of the Collingwood & Lake Superior line of steamers, writes:

"I have examined the life-saving appliances for ship's boats, invented by Mr. H. F. Coombs, of St. John, N. B., and I consider them the best and most practicable attachment for that purpose that I have seen. As far as my judgment goes, I think it would be a wise and humane action if the government would make it compulsory on shipowners to have the attachment on all or some of their life-boats."

This is a strong recommendation from a high authority.—*P. E. Island Examiner, Dec. 14th, 1887.*

Hamilton, Nov. 4.—When the barge Oriental was lost with all hands a few miles off Port Dalhousie, about ten days ago, a despatch from that place said:—"It is supposed that the straining of the Oriental in the heavy sea opened her seams, causing her to fill and sink."

That was no doubt true, but it was only part of the story. Such events occur so often on the Great Lakes that they have lost their significance by their terrible frequency. Year after year vessels go down and are forgotten the next day by all but the widows and orphaned children of the unfortunate sailors, who, like the crew of the Oriental, have drowned within sight of the lights on shore. Only sailors know how many coffin-ships are fitted out every spring with every probability that they will never see the close of the season. In this country there is no law to regulate the quantity or quality of a crew even in a well-found seaworthy vessel. She may leave port with as many or as few men or boys as the owner chooses. There is no inspection of sailing craft except by the insurance companies for their own information, and this covers only the hull. No matter in what condition the rigging or outfit of a vessel may be, no attention is paid to it by authority. Life-saving apparatus is unknown on lake vessels. "I have seen only one schooner in my time that carried a life-buoy," said Mr. J. T. Carey, master of the St. Catharines' Seamen's Assembly, to a *Globe* reporter. "Every vessel has a yawl boat, but many of them are unfit to float in smooth water, let alone carry a crew in a sea." In insurable and fairly well-found craft the sailor's lot is perilous enough, but of this he makes no complaint. It is against the dangers that he should not be asked to face that his only mouth-piece, the Seaman's District Assembly, speaks for 6,000 sailors. They are exposed to many hardships and dangers, to stress of wind and sea, the natural accompaniments of their calling. But the risks of navigation are added to by the coffin ships, unseaworthy, overloaded, undermanned vessels. Perhaps one-tenth of the sailing vessels on the lakes are, like the Oriental, without a rating, that is, they are so old and frail that even the insurance companies —which will take some pretty risky risks—will not touch them. "A man does not need to ship in a vessel that he doesn't think seaworthy," says the careless reader of the sailor's complaint. It is true that good sailors are seldom found in the coffin-ships, and this is another danger, for the crews of such are usually green, incompetent men or boys, unable to handle their vessel in a blow. But a vessel that is seaworthy, with her proper cargo, is easily made unseaworthy by over-loading. Ask a captain about this as he watches his forechains sinking deeper and deeper under the dusty load that the elevator spouts are pouring into his hatches. Suggest to him that if he should meet a "snorter" on the trip his vessel would not live through it. He knows the danger better than you, but he says "what can I do? My orders are that rates are low and I must put into the vessel all I can get. If rates are good the owner must make hay while the sun shines. I know it's taking pretty hard chances, but I've got a wife and little one's at home, and if I don't do it there are other men waiting for my job. I

guess we can dodge along and keep out of the way of the snorters." Sometimes he can't avoid "snorters" and when a gale strikes his over-loaded ship, she founders, and to the act of Providence is charged that for which man alone is responsible The sailors think they can ride as fast as "the old man"—the captain—can drive and so they go to their deaths. There is loss of life and property every year, which no human prudence could forestall, for the vastness and might of these great lakes are such as few can realise. But such losses as that of the Oriental are preventible, and the way to prevent them is to prohibit such craft from leaving port. The Oriental was a 21-year-old schooner, her topmasts taken out and used as a barge. She had so little canvas as to be unable to proceed under sail when cut loose from the steamer, even had her crew been competent, but her company consisted of only a captain and mate—presumably from their positions capable seamen—and two men who had never sailed before. Only two men able to reef or steer in a three-masted vessel loaded with over 700 tons of coal! What could these unfortunates—compelled no doubt by the necessity of earning a living to ship in such a vessel—do but wait for the howling seas to swallow their coffin-ship, while the fiery eye of the Port Dalhousie light alone saw them go down. Other vessels on the lakes are like her, and their end will be the same. The B2 vessels of to-day are the coffin-ships of next year, and the ranks are kept well filled. Some of the tows of steambarges trading on the lakes are not fit to cross Toronto Bay, but no law says they shall not carry men to their destruction. "Some of them are so rotten that I can pick pieces out of them with my fingers and they would go down in a summer squall that is over in half an hour," said Mr. Carey. "I have seen sailing vessels leave Port Dalhousie with holes in their sides patched up with pieces of canvas and the Niagra, with a hold only thirteen feet deep, was loaded down till she drew fourteen feet. As a rule vessel-owners are willing to pay reasonable wages and carry good men, but some prefer cheap, incapable crews and will take any chances with their vessels." The sailor man has had but little legislation for his benefit, and not long ago an attempt was made to have rescinded the regulation requiring certificated officers for vessels in tow. If the safety and proper construction of buildings on land come within the authority of the community, surely, he says, some supervison should be had over the edifice that float. For a dollar and a half or two dollars a day the sailor undergoes hardships and perils such as none know but himself, and it cannot be said that there remains nothing to be done for the men whose lives are spent on the mighty waters, marked with all the round of fantastic names from the passage of Death's Door to the reef of Skilligalee.—*Toronto Globe, Nov 4. 1887.*

The foregoing are only a few of the hundreds of recorded cases of suffering and death from shipwreck. Hundreds of wrecks occur of which we know nothing, but doubtless, on these, chapters of horrors could be written, of how the ship's crew and passengers, adrift in poor boats, died one by one, until the last man or woman perished from cold and hunger,—and how they suffered will only be known when the sea shall give up its dead.

The life-saving stations, which dot the shores of the United States and Old England, have demonstrated that by the use of proper appliances thousands of lives have been saved from a watery grave. Doubtless if all ships were provided with a sufficient number of boats fitted with air chambers in the interior, at the stem and stern, and boxes securely fastened, kept filled with food and water, and a compass and sail, with oars securely chained to the boat, and metal rowlocks, a can of oil, and some simple, compact signaling apparatus, and last a few iron rods fastened lengthwise to the bottom of boats, to assist in righting in case of a capsize, or as a last resort to help in climbing upon the bottom of a boat. With these a boat, if not picked up by a passing vessel, would reach a port of safety.

The writer, as already intimated, seeks no personal gain and is ready to abandon, without fee or reward, any patent rights he now may have, if only legislation can be obtained whereby the needless loss of life at sea may be prevented. The assistance of legislators and other humane people and societies, is earnestly requested to secure the end sought for by the writer,—namely, to succor the perishing.

The thanks of the writer is due to the clergymen whose names here follow, for their kind words of approval, and to A. M. Smith, Esq., for valuable assistance rendered.

HENRY F. COOMBS.

Mr. Henry F. Coombs,

My Dear Sir,—You have my heartiest sympathy in your humane efforts to make less perilous the calling of those who follow the sea. I have no doubt our legislators will gladly, as far as possible, second you in such a work of love.

Respectfully Yours,

GEO. O. GATES,

St. John, N.B., April 18, 1888. *Pastor of Ger. St. Bap. Church.*

Mr. Henry F. Coombs,

Dear Sir,—The matter of providing for the safety of sailors and passengers is something that calls for the most earnest attention and the use of every available appliance.

Even if the best were done the danger would be great, and the story of suffering and death would be sad enough.

It is surely possible to prevent unseaworthy ships from going to sea, to prohibit overloading, and to compel owners and captains, when they do not of their own accord, through the dictates of humanity, do so, to provide every vessel with the best known appliances, so that in case of shipwreck or other disaster those on board may have some chance of saving their lives. That these things are not attended to as they ought to be may be known to any one who is accustomed to travel.

I have, myself, been on a lake boat which sometimes carried hundreds of passengers, where I distinctly saw the seams opening and closing with the straining of the ship, and the green water springing from the rotton planks. The vessel was soon afterwards sold and went to pieces on her first trip on one of the upper lakes where she was exposed to a heavier sea.

I heartily join with all who ask for the utmost protection being afforded to seamen in every way within the control of the authorities.

St. John, N. B., April 17, 1888. G. BRUCE.

Mr. Henry F. Coombs,

Dear Sir,—We have much pleasure in commending your pamphlet to the thoughtful consideration of legislators and other humane people, and you have our best wishes in your efforts to bring about legislation that shall reduce, as much as possible, the loss of life and sufferings of those who go down to the sea in ships.

*Signed on behalf of St. John Preachers' Meeting.

W. LAWSON.

St. John, N. B., Canada, April 16, 1888.

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*The St. John Preachers' Meeting is presided over by the President of the New Brunswick and P. E. I. Conference.